



What Works: Positive cultural and behavioural change through staff engagement

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1. Context

In 2016-17 Advance HE (formerly the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Equality Challenge Unit, Higher Education Academy), supported by the UK higher education (HE) funding councils (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [HEFCW], Scottish Funding Council [SFC]), commissioned work to inform strategies to improve practices in leadership, governance and management in HE, based on previous best evidence of 'what works'. This initial work found senior leaders in HE were enthusiastic for a 'what works' style approach to provide the sector with clear, robust and relevant evidence. Practical insights to enable decision making were also proposed, based on examples of good practice in other sectors, and considering how principles of effective initiatives could be applied to HE for maximum impact. Results of this first phase are summarised in the Leadership Foundation's [What Works: The Concept](#) report.

A second phase was designed to collate evidence from previous publications from the Leadership Foundation in greater depth. For this phase, [Media FHE](#) was commissioned to review this evidence and provide insights related to effective interventions in two areas: 'what works' in supporting women's careers and 'what works' in promoting positive cultural and behavioural change. In March 2019, Advance HE published a [summary report](#) describing 'what works' in supporting women's careers. This summary report will describe findings and recommendations related to effective interventions and initiatives to promote positive cultural and behavioural change through staff engagement.

2. Approach

Media FHE was commissioned to conduct a rapid review of a sample of publications from the Leadership Foundation to summarise evidence that related to effective interventions in promoting behavioural change. Key information was extracted from each publication, including:

- + Intervention theme
- + Type of evidence (for example survey, interviews, case studies)
- + Number of respondents and/or institutions
- + Intervention details
- + Any theoretical underpinnings
- + Details relating to intervention effectiveness and impact (where available)

Interventions were grouped by theme to facilitate their engagement, understanding and use within the HE sector. The themes identified and used in this project were unique to the context of the HE sector and the timing in which the Leadership Foundation released these publications. As such, it is likely that in future evaluations the identified themes will evolve to reflect changes in the sector over time. Details of the identified themes are presented below.

3. Findings and lessons

3.1 Summary

A review of the previous publications from the Leadership Foundation identified ten main interventions in promoting behavioural change. These are listed below:

- + Talent management and career support
- + Devolved or collegiate leadership
- + Performance management and goal setting

- + Staff development and training
- + Coaching and mentoring
- + Communication and feedback
- + Collaboration, team-working and networks
- + Workload management and staff well-being
- + Staff engagement for teaching
- + Staff engagement for research

3.2 Talent management and career support

3.2.1 Findings

The lack of effective leadership pipelines in HE is well documented within studies such as [Talent Management: Learning Across Sectors](#) (Hirsh & Tyler, 2017) and [Staffing Models and Institutional Flexibility](#) (Whitchurch & Gordon 2013). Engaging staff, improving progression routes and making the most of talented individuals all play an important role in promoting positive cultural and behavioural change.

However, evidence gathered from the [Higher Education Leaders and Management Survey](#) (a Leadership Foundation survey) revealed high levels of uncertainty around the processes for the identification and development of future leaders, as approximately one-third of the sample reported not knowing whether such programmes were available within their institutions.

3.2.2 Recommendations

Providing information about broad career paths, access to career advice, management training and the various on-the-job growth opportunities available to staff will help to minimise the level of uncertainty around leadership progression. Managers should get to know their staff well enough to facilitate trusting conversations about individual careers and organisational opportunities. For example, the use of structured skill and career development, which extends beyond the early career years, has been highlighted as a method for good practice. This will also help attract and retain high-quality people through personalised attention to their development. In addition, consideration should be given to the importance of line manager support. It has been demonstrated that significant investment of time in face-to-face communication by line managers has a positive impact on developing the institutional culture.

Issues potentially hindering positive behavioural change are associated with career stage. The [report](#), *Mid-career academic women: strategies, choices and motivation* (Coate & Kandiko, 2015), focuses on the career strategies of women who self-identify as mid-career, and it has been found that mid-career stage is often neglected. This is due to the focus on early career researchers and senior leaders. Institutions should therefore be offering targeted support for the mid-career stage, including mentoring, career planning and role definition. Institutions that also focus on the development of successors for senior leadership roles or 'high potential' individuals, usually in mid-career, give them a broader range of career experience.

The concept of 'prestige' in HE (ie what values, behaviours and beliefs are prized highly) can also have an impact on talent spotting and career support (eg Coate & Kandiko, 2014). Evidence suggests that broadening the span of work that is recognised as valuable, and sharing less prestigious work, can free up individuals to take on new opportunities and widen the talent pool. In addition, rather than leaving staff to apply for roles, taking career progression seriously and actively managing job moves or access to experiences (ie secondments, projects, placements) has helped organisations fill critical roles as well as increase access to development.

Overall, research has uncovered an ambivalent attitude towards leadership among many academics – a feeling that it just happens during the course of a typical career. This can make succession planning and access to leadership more difficult. Increased availability of information, discussion, formal career support and ensuring talent management is part of the organisational culture, and all of which can all help to mitigate academics' ambivalence and promote positive behavioural change as a result.

3.3 Devolved and collegiate leadership

3.3.1 Findings

Much current management research argues that hierarchical models are outdated and inappropriate in knowledge-based sectors. It is felt that a distributed approach to leadership helps to bring about positive behavioural change within an institution in the form of responsiveness, transparency, convenience and teamwork.

3.3.2 Recommendations

Academics have reinforced time and time again the importance of autonomy and freedom in their roles. This has the potential to jar with a top-down approach to management and leadership, and thus involving academics in decision making is seen as a beneficial way of maintaining long-term cohesion, direction and loyalty within an institution and its departments. The report, [Developing Collective Leadership in Higher Education](#) (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling 2008), states that in a HE context, this style of leadership can be particularly complex and too important to leave to a small group of individuals in formal roles.

While distributed leadership is seen as a necessity within an institution, as it offers a viable and effective approach for developing and enhancing leadership in HE, and for engaging a wide range of interests and expertise in the leadership process, researchers warn it is not the panacea.

There is a risk that devolved leadership approaches can increase fragmentation, lack of role clarity, slow decision making and variations in individual capability. There is also the possibility of dysfunction and confusion in the exercise of roles and responsibilities if informal networks and relationships become neglected. Aspects of modern HE can also undermine collaboration and teamwork. Performance related pay and the pressure of the [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF) may lead to more single-minded pursuits and disengagement from other activities that are important to collective operations. Thus, providing direction and even inspiration from the top is highlighted as important in balancing top-down, bottom-up and horizontal leadership within universities.

Nevertheless, there are also many benefits to devolved leadership and, in particular, its role within academic excellence. Institutions have remarked that they see leadership within their faculties as a matter of 'empowering people and having everyone contribute', and that 'leaders never created excellent teaching on their own.' Decisions should be made through increased consensus, especially with regards to teaching, as it has been found that it is rare for individuals to spontaneously and autonomously take action to develop teaching.

3.4 Performance management and goal setting

3.4.1 Findings

UK universities are increasingly coming under pressure to perform, eg through student recruitment, income generation and delivery of teaching and research. In response, many are starting to hold staff accountable through performance measurements and targets. While there is no one-size-fits-all system of performance management, it has been found that the most effective institutions use a hybrid system, with stewardship being the predominant approach to promote effective behavioural change. Stewardship approaches focus on long-term outcomes through people's knowledge and values, autonomy and shared leadership, all within a high trust environment.

3.4.2 Recommendations

Managers ultimately need to be trained to deliver performance management effectively and a number of case studies have demonstrated how the implementation of new management frameworks have been successful. This includes the framework at the University of Leeds, presented in the following [case study](#), which involved a two-year knowhow programme for 1,600 managers who were given short, practical training sessions in areas such as reward and recognition, and performance management. A key feature of this was a biennial online

survey, which was a vital tool for measuring organisational performance and provided a holistic picture of university-wide strengths and weaknesses.

A further case study at the University of Birmingham, reported in an article in the Leadership Foundation magazine, Engage, entitled [Sustainable excellence: unlocking the potential of a leading global university](#) (Paver 2015), touched upon their existing Staff Development Review Scheme and how it was transformed into a Performance Development Review (PDR) scheme for academic staff. For this review, staff took part in a structured conversation about their performance and development needs and agreed outcomes that were achievable but also stretched their abilities. The PDR scheme was piloted in 2011 and was regarded as successful enough to be implemented across the institution. This highlights the importance of pilots in testing and refining an approach before roll-out. High-quality consultation and communication are vital with all stakeholders, and training with academic managers equips an institution to handle the new approach and foresee any difficult conversations.

Despite these successes, if not handled carefully performance management and goal setting can be regarded as an intrusion which risks undermining academic autonomy. Thus, institutions could focus on recruitment and reward as an alternative to performance reviews for academics, to ensure the people they attract and retain are intrinsically driven to pursue the HEI's long-term scholarly mission.

However, while some institutions have adopted this approach and have used one-off payments linked to individual, team and institutional performance (ie bonus payments for individuals who reached student recruitment targets or developed a new programme), it has been found that this element of performance management may undermine collaboration and teamwork, and so should be carefully considered before use.

Finally, touched upon in the previous section around the importance of open discussion, annual staff reviews were found to be a useful tool for discussions around progress, goals and aspirations. This could include an agreed plan for raising performance if expectations are not met, which can be a valuable addition to these types of meetings. Engagement in goal setting can also be helped by coaching, something which the University of Bournemouth used successfully. Through coaching, they were able to advance goal setting and were effective in emphasising work-related, not just personal, progress. It also helped staff to think about progress towards institutional goals, which in turn helped to increase collaboration.

3.5 Staff development and training

3.5.1 Findings

There is a robust case regarding the benefit of extensive and targeted staff development and training. This includes evidence to suggest it is an important tool for:

- + Improving on-the-job capabilities
- + Providing the conditions for excellence
- + Feeding the leadership pipeline
- + Managing change
- + Updating skills
- + Plugging specialist gaps

It also has a more general role in improving well-being, confidence and staff engagement.

This was particularly prevalent in the University of Birmingham case study mentioned previously (Paver 2015). The case study explored their successful and effective Senior Leadership Programme which contained activities such as tailored training events, networking opportunities, a strategic change project, a leadership exchange, a 360-degree appraisal and action learning sets. The feedback from these activities were clear, with

managers pointing to increased self-confidence, greater empathy in dealing with people, a strengthened ability to take a strategic overview and the acquisition of more reflective critical thinking skills.

3.5.2 Recommendations

Professional development activities around internal leadership, management courses and Leadership Foundation (now Advance HE) courses are prevalent within the range of learning and development activities on offer. The HELMs report [Higher Education Leadership and Management Survey \(HELMS\): Motivating and developing leaders](#) (Peters & Ryan, 2015) highlights that overall, staff are satisfied with the level of institutional support they receive for their development and learning, and are engaged with the activities. To address staff development and engagement further, mentoring scheme interventions should be considered.

While it has been found that management training is crucial to ensuring general efficacy and improving staff engagement, consideration needs to be given to middle-management level, as they have a tendency to be 'ill-prepared' for their role. This is due to the fact that academics can often 'fall-in' to management positions rather than proactively choose the role. For those who lack the knowledge or expertise to implement innovations in their respective departments, external training also helps to increase their capacity to lead and communicate change.

Regarding leaders and potential leaders, development and training must be accessible and communicated to these staff proactively, with evidence provided of how this is done and the impact made.

3.6 Coaching and mentoring

3.6.1 Findings

Research evidence suggests coaching and mentoring interventions can engage staff, give careers a sense of direction, develop leaders, aid wellbeing and ultimately enhance individual and institutional performance.

A number of case studies highlight how institutions are investing in creating a 'coaching culture' where support and challenge are embedded into day-to-day interactions and shared problem solving is encouraged.

Studies on this topic outline several approaches including external coaching, developing internal coaching provision, one-to-one and group coaching, leadership coaching, shared coaching with external organisations, coaching clubs and creating online provision.

3.6.2 Recommendations – Coaching

Overall, coaching is seen as a beneficial strategy, with strong evidence available to suggest that those who chose to become a 'coaching champion' have had coaching skills embedded into their everyday practice. This, in turn, enhances individual confidence and helps to create a new communicative framework for more robust and effective team working. Despite this, there is some confusion around how to accurately measure its effectiveness and value. It has thus been found that formal validation or monitoring of coaching activity can help to maintain it as a professional activity and alter perceptions of it simply being 'someone to talk to'.

In several institutions, the perception of coaching is already very positive, and its use has clearly resulted in behavioural change. One institution noted that 'coaching behaviours' consist of managing, influencing and communicating with each other. Coaches thus report that the intervention has helped them to reflect and act on issues in a safe and highly supportive environment. They were also able to develop their own coaching ability, which is seen as a transformational experience.

Consideration should also be given to the positive impact of external coaching, as staff rate their experience with external coaches as highly effective, with coaches being credited with improving confidence, self-awareness and challenging self-limiting habits and beliefs. Staff also felt encouraged to be more effective as leaders, stepping into both formal and informal positions of authority as a result.

Coaching is an ideal opportunity to mobilise a group of academics, but there is also a great benefit in developing a coaching pool between institutions and local authorities (ie NHS trusts, City Council), as evidence

suggests increased levels of emotional self-awareness, assertiveness and stress management from this type of intervention.

3.6.3 Recommendations – Mentoring

Staff who work with a mentor benefit from the relationship, and it is found to be a sustainable investment in staff development and increasing staff engagement. Thought should go into delivery methods, as one-to-one discussions, mentoring and coaching are preferred in comparison to more formal workshop-based methods.

Several studies have found that mentoring has not only helped staff in their current roles and areas of expertise but has also been a vehicle to transfer new skills and knowledge. For example, at Teesside University, as cited in the Engage article [Mentoring academic leaders for business](#) (Helyer, 2012), staff with business engagement expertise collaborated with less-experienced colleagues, which created opportunities to build new networks as well as develop new curricula. In contrast, recent research by Advance HE, commissioned by UKRI, has found additional support for the use of mentoring, but has found that the evidence for the effectiveness of mentoring is mixed.

Mentoring has also been found to be particularly effective in supporting staff with protected characteristics or from minority backgrounds. Numerous studies have outlined successful mentoring schemes for female staff, as well as for encouraging disabled leaders in higher education. The value of networking and formal and informal peer support, as well as the opportunity for professional development, should be taken seriously for these groups.

Studies also show that mentoring can be useful for focusing on areas that are in need of development, or working towards institutional goals. It can be an effective tool in encouraging academic enterprise and entrepreneurship, for instance, and for emphasising important areas such as impact in research and the use of technology in teaching.

3.7 Communication and feedback

3.7.1 Findings

The high levels of autonomy and freedom enjoyed by academics in HE can run the risk of disengagement and feelings of isolation, thus amplifying the need for effective communication.

Various studies point out that successful dispersed or collegiate leadership approaches and local decision making depend on effective communication and engagement. Thornhill et al (1996), cited in at least one Leadership Foundation study, found a significant relationship between the ways an organisation communicated with its staff and their levels of commitment. For instance, it was found that resource constraints and demands for higher quality of outcomes necessitated high levels of commitment from all staff.

Various studies also show that communication offers the chance to create a connection to the organisation, but it has to be two-way and genuine or the opposite effect can result. Effective communication during times of operational change is also highlighted as particularly important.

3.7.2 Recommendations

There are numerous ways to engage with staff and to start a conversation about institutional change. These can include talks to staff, lunch meetings, surgeries, newsletters, blogs and online communication such as Twitter. It is also extremely important to develop a culture of recognition and feedback within an institution, one which celebrates success via an institutional award, for example.

Surveys are also an important means of engaging staff, as well as an opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, consultations are pinpointed as a crucial tool, particularly in advance of making changes, and are most effective when they are seen to influence outcomes. Heads of departments have used these approaches in the past to engage staff, particularly when a wide consultation was needed and feedback could be used to influence proposals.

As mentioned in the previous section, coaching and mentoring are also beneficial ways of improving feedback and communication. The level of communication can be taken one step further by creating staff 'improvement teams' to address specific issues and having staff take ownership of them. In this regard, face-to-face contact for those working on research projects is often a preferred method of communication, as it ensures all project team members can be present.

While the above are all effective means of communication and engaging staff, it is recommended to ensure that a wide representation of staff are present to give feedback, such as on university committees.

3.8 Collaboration, team-working and networks

3.8.1 Findings

The benefits of collaboration, team-working and belonging to networks, both formal and informal, and how they contribute to staff engagement and behavioural change are well documented. Various reports (ie Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008) highlight how informal networks and collaborations are integral to leadership and management and contribute strongly to a shared sense of engagement, ownership, purpose and identity.

3.8.2 Recommendations

Institutions are increasingly using team motivators to organise social events and seminar programmes to aid staff interaction and networking, which are particularly important for junior staff as they can make contacts and develop their own profiles. The role of networking benefits staff across an institution, including researchers, as it encourages innovations and spreads good practice. It has also been found that researchers are increasingly using social media as a form of networking, using platforms such as Twitter to promote interdisciplinary research and encourage collaborations. Such networking and collaboration activities are regarded as a useful way to break up structural silos and develop multi-skilled teams in which individuals can deputise each other and pursue their own portfolios.

As with targeted mentoring, networking is also particularly effective in supporting staff in minority groups or those with protected characteristics; giving those in underrepresented groups a voice. It is important to ensure that networks of this kind have formal systems in place to report to high-level committees so that discussions have an impact on organisational policy and practice.

While it is evidently extremely beneficial to network, individuals are keen to maintain overall organisational control, as opposed to having their institution intervene. External programmes such as Advance HE's [Top Management Programme](#) (TMP) can prove beneficial, as the programme helps develop networks and collaborations outside of the institution.

However, it is recommended consultations with staff networks should not replace traditional consultation process with trade unions, rather stay complementary to them.

3.9 Workload management and staff-wellbeing

3.9.1 Findings

Most universities have policies or guidelines on workload allocation, but they are often general, with the detail left to departments, and seem not to guard against staff perceptions of workload overload. How best to manage workload has become a pressing problem in HE, not least because of the negative consequences on staff wellbeing. Several studies looking at staffing models touch on the importance of engaging staff in their development.

3.9.2 Recommendations

With regards to workload, institutions need to firstly identify essential elements within their existing workload policies, such as equity, transparency and consultation, and to provide a framework model from this. Once these have been identified, staff engagement is crucial for achieving effective workload allocation practice, such as informal, regular monitoring of loads and fine-tuning the model by heads of department based on staff feedback.

There should also be an opportunity for staff to take ownership of workload decisions, and consultation with staff on this topic is vital. It has been found that when staff become actively involved, their awareness of the complexities of the problem of workload allocation makes them more supportive.

Staff engagement can be taken a step further, wherein staff dissatisfaction with current policies can be used as a driver for improvement, with staff becoming members of an 'improvement team' to diagnose issues and design appropriate solutions. There is also the option of including staff on university committees, as committing time for one-to-one conversations, especially at middle management level, helps establish a successful partnership approach with regards to workload allocation.

With the above in mind, the number of hours needed to do work should not be underestimated. Even though institutions can have a workload matrix covering teaching, research and administration, it can be difficult to quantify the distribution of 'invisible', emotionally challenging work such as pastoral care. Therefore, it is important to keep these hours in consideration.

While many organisations invest heavily in wellbeing, the activities provided can often be reactive and driven by intervention when required. The bigger picture is not always considered, and underlying issues are not tackled.

Some successful, alternative approaches include the introduction of 'psychological contracts' for research staff alongside their formal staff contracts, including policies such as flexible working, wellbeing programmes, staff review, career frameworks, role profiles, staff surveys to provide feedback, bonuses and goodwill gestures, as well as various forms of communication. However, it has been warned that those with the most flexibility in their contract can sometimes be the ones who are most self-reportedly overworked. Leadership teams should ensure that flexible working policies do not exacerbate workload or blur the boundaries between work and life outside work.

Thinking about wellbeing more generally, there is also the option of pooling expertise from multiple stakeholder groups (ie HR, occupational health, health and safety, sport and physical activity, and staff development), which can reduce duplication and increase effectiveness within policies. Finally, involving academic experts from within the institution is also highly beneficial.

3.10 Staff engagement for teaching

3.10.1 Findings

With the introduction of the [Teaching Excellence Framework](#) (TEF), the quality of teaching and learning in HE has become a high priority. The studies in the TEF concerned with staff engagement for teaching cover the following:

- + The common characteristics and organisational structures to be found in departments with excellent teaching.
- + What leadership that encourages excellent teaching and learning looks like.
- + Academics' perceptions of their teaching roles.

3.10.2 Recommendations

Several studies highlight the importance of dispersed, distributed and collaborative leadership in the delivery of good teaching. However, while academics appreciate the lack of direct instruction, some feel the need for more support, especially since the pressure of the REF can drive academics to disengage with non-REF rated

activities, such as teaching. The option for a 'communally recognised standard' in teaching and more discussion about good teaching is therefore seen as beneficial.

Professional development and training are also seen as important to support change and innovation in teaching. However, a lack of content on teaching and learning in generic leadership and management courses is an issue. Leadership in the teaching field increasingly requires specialist skills and knowledge of contemporary approaches to learning and teaching, thus creating the need for specialist leadership development programmes, such as the Excellence in University Teaching programme at Utrecht University. This programme was credited with improving the university's national teaching ranking, by using several approaches such as identifying teaching problems and turning them into opportunities, as well as building a community of practice.

There are a number of ways to engage staff with regards to improving teaching quality, such as staff retreats where programme goals, teaching approaches and curriculum content can be agreed. The establishment of teaching quality committees, as well as providing the opportunity for feedback and consultation, as seen in previous sections, is also beneficial to improve teaching quality. Spotting and supporting innovators in teaching to be included in these processes is an influential way of building effective networks and communities. The option of using 'boundary spanners' could also be considered – leaders who can support these academic innovators to explicitly identify ways in which their micro-level changes can be used to evidence macro-level strategic change plans and institutional performance indicators.

3.11 Staff engagement for research

3.11.1 Findings

Reports on this topic include:

- + Interventions which engage staff in interdisciplinary research.
- + How to embed research impact and success through staff engagement.
- + The organisational and leadership approaches that best secure research excellence.

3.11.2 Recommendations

As previously discussed, the importance of dispersed, collegiate leadership in the area of research is well documented. Structures that are flatter enable greater autonomy, flexibility, and are found to serve research better. If pursuing this structure, it is important to ensure academics' values and priorities are aligned with those of the institution they work for (ie that they have a good working knowledge of how key policies and procedures can enhance rather than impede their research).

However, institutions need to be wary of the potential of decreased monitoring and feedback where there are higher levels of autonomy among staff. It can mean that early career academics are unsure where to turn for support, increasing a sense of vulnerability, exclusion and, ultimately, disengagement among these staff. Possible solutions for this includes mentoring, coaching and supervision, and training and learning networks, particularly for early and mid-career academics. Networking through social media is also beneficial, enhancing research culture by increasing the information flow in internal and external networks.

With regards to the above, a number of universities in the US have found that open, flexible and competitive cultures, driven by common purpose, a willingness to take risks and mutual respect between colleagues, create a positive atmosphere for collaborative research. It is thought that this endeavour for cultural change has helped address more fundamental differences in strategy and approach whilst stimulating new forms of research activity, rather than just on-the-surface changes.

While this type of approach can be beneficial, consideration needs to be taken over who ultimately makes research decisions. For instance, departmental panels could make cautious and conservative choices that favour a more narrow disciplinary focus. The risk is that this can deter new, early-career researchers from moving into multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary projects.

4. Summary

A number of initiatives are already in place within institutions to promote positive cultural and behavioural change through staff engagement. Many of these initiatives are successful, including the introduction of mentoring/coaching schemes, the application of more distributed, collegiate leadership as well as increased informal networks across an institution. These can be particularly helpful for those in the early career stage, offering them the support required while still ensuring autonomy within their role. However, those in the mid-career stage can often become neglected, especially as they tend to ‘fall’ into their role as opposed to actively seeking it out. It will be imperative to ensure these initiatives will benefit these staff through consistent communication and the opportunity to provide feedback and consultation on policy changes that affect them. Lessons learned and recommendations provided within this report will assist in better promoting positive cultural and behavioural change through staff engagement, enabling more authentic forms of communication among staff and increasing the good practice of collaboration within teaching, research and beyond.

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